FALLING IN LOVE WITH JESUS

April 2, 1989

10:30 a.m. Worship Service

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St. Giles' Cathedral, Edinburgh

"He said to him... 'Do you love me?' Peter...said, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep.'"

—John 21:17 (RSV)

Scripture
John 21:1-17

It comes down to the man, doesn't it? At some point, out of all the people in history, he has laid a claim on us. It may have been an individual emotional upheaval, and it may have been an intellectual itch we tried to scratch for two decades. It may have been a fire in our being about human rights and the dignity of all human beings, and it may have been a sense of inadequacy or guilt or disgust at personal weakness that resisted resolution, or it may have been a profound

desire to affirm the beauty of the world and the goodness of life and the love deep within us.

Somehow, he was and is in the middle of it. Prof at Yale.
American Theologian, Jaroslav Pelikan has written a
Jesus Through the Centuries
strenuous book about the enormous impact Jesus of
Pelikan propose that
Nazareth has had on culture. Even when the
institutions of religion seem to sag, the man
continues to compel. Pelikan begins his work with
this provocative thought:

"If it were possible, with some sort of super-magnet, to pull up out of history every scrap of metal bearing at least a trace of his name, how much would be left? It is from his birth that most of the human race dates its calendars, it is by his name that millions curse and in his name that millions pray." [p. 1]

It all comes down to this man, doesn't it?

Across the centuries people have been fascinated, almost compelled, sometimes obsessed with him - believers and unbelievers. Art, literature, music have celebrated him. He has been

a friend of counter culture: has offered a ("hand to put your hand into"). has been a Superstar on Broadway, a Bridge over troubled waters, and has continued to speak to high culture in Magnificat, Passion, Mass and Messiah. He has gathered up aspirations, expressed deep love, and been the rallying point for the anger of communities as diverse as the human race. He is at the center of liberation movements from Solidarity in Poland to Alan Boesak's Council of Churches in South Africa. He was in Chinese House Churches for several decades and he is at the center of base communities in Central America today. He has comforted the pious and somehow managed to speak to the irreverent as well. [redacted], comforted afflicted + afflicted comforted

There are choices to be made about how best to express it: from J. S. Bach to the simplest Sunday School song; from the elegance of the Cathedral on Sunday, to taking the Sacrament to the patients in the geriatric wing; from the breathtaking selflessness of Mother Teresa, to the

simply decision not to cheat on a final exam. But at the center is the man. And those of us who prefer our Gospel in complex sentences, encased in words like "empirical" and "existential" need the occasional reminder.

I was reminded of that at a seminar on the relationship of the Gospel to the life of the nation. I found myself deeply troubled by the complexity of our economic situation, pulled - as we all are - between concern for the poor and the need for a viable and responsible national economy. The topic invites passion and the leadership of the workshop was understandably partisan and sometimes angry. It was not easy going for anyone and it certainly wasn't pietistic in the usual sense of that word. The name "Jesus Christ" was invoked a lot and not always in prayer. On the last evening the leadership team assembled as a panel to discuss the matter of how individuals who care about justice and rights and also about an effective and productive economy in this complex environment find

that their own souls are fed. I was startled to hear one of the leaders - a strong, creative woman from New York City, deeply committed to social justice and social change - answer "I am fed by my personal relationship with Jesus Christ." It was a magnificent reminder that regardless of where we are ecclesiastically: - High Church Anglican to Free Will Baptist and all points between; or politically - liberal to conservative; regardless of anything else, at the center is the man, and our coming to terms with him.

Krister Stendahl, one of the leading New Testament scholars in the world, now a Scandanavian Bishop, ~~gave~~ S. was given a lecture in a midwestern city in America and a layman from Iowa had got up during the question and answer period and asked very simply, "Professor Stendahl, how did you get 'hooked' on this stuff?" The audience leaned back and expected from Stendahl a fairly long-haired description of the historical, conceptual, philosophical path by which he had come, and it was

a great moment when Stendahl said, "My family and I were not church people at all and the only way I could rebel against the mores of my family was to go to church! And when I got to church, within six months, I fell in love with Jesus." [Trinity Seminary Review, Fall, 1982, pgs. 33, 34]

The question is posed first by Jesus himself. "Do you love me Peter?" It is found in the Gospel lesson for the day.

On the night Jesus was arrested and subjected to the humiliation of a phony religious trial before Caiaphas, Peter had followed at a safe distance into the courtyard of the high priest's residence. It was there, warming himself at the fire, that Peter had been challenged. "You are one of them!" a young woman had said. And Peter, startled, frightened, had denied it. Three times it happened that night and each time Peter denied knowing Jesus, punctuating his third denial with an obscenity. It is one of the more poignantly human stories in the Gospel narrative, and it concludes

powerfully with the cock crowing and Jesus' eyes meeting Peter's and Peter weeping bitterly, devastated by his own humanness.

What occurred next, for Peter, is unclear. Jesus was crucified on a Friday. If the disciples were around, most of them at least, kept a discreet distance. On the first day of the week, Peter was one of the first to discover the empty tomb. And then there occurred a series of mysterious resurrection appearances. Some time later Peter and the others are fishing in the early morning when the risen Christ appears on the shore. They eat breakfast together and the stage is set for the conclusion of the matter of Peter's denial.

As Peter denied knowing Jesus three times, now Jesus asks him three times, "Simon Peter, do you love me?" And as he denied Jesus three times now Peter professes his love, with the same increasing intensity. And three times Jesus adds the admonition: "Feed my lambs...tend my sheep...feed my sheep;..."

There are at least two dynamics happening in this intense interchange. The first has to do with the power of Jesus' love for Peter. [redacted] Surely, after the crucifixion, following his own terrible cowardice, Peter was virtually a prisoner of his own guilt. We know a little bit about our vulnerability and culpability here. We know what it means to set high goals and espouse noble ideals, to plan to be brave and courageous and strong, and then head for cover as soon as the going gets tough. We know what it feels like to fail to live up to our own expectations of ourselves and the guilt which results. We can, that is to say, sense more than a little of the self-inflicted remorse Peter was experiencing after the crucifixion.

"Do you love me, Peter?" What was he supposed to say to that? The truth of the matter was that he had not behaved in a way which expressed love for anyone or anything but his own life. Yet, he did love Jesus. How very human this

internal polarity is. He knew what he had done and he knew the intensity of his own soul. He loved Jesus as he had never loved anything before. And so the first dynamic here has to do with Peter, even in the midst of the pain and guilt and remorse of the moment, hearing and experiencing the steady love of Jesus for him. Jesus somehow could love people who don't appear to have done much to deserve that love. Jesus somehow could discern that which is lovable in even the most unlovable characters. Because Jesus stayed with him, even as he was backing down; because Jesus was faithful, even when he wasn't, Peter could begin to see something of value in himself, could "love what Jesus loved in him."

That's the first dynamic. And when it happens - when in the midst of our sense of our humanity at its most human - our failures, foibles, our self-serving posturing, we know ourselves loved even by another, it is like the salvation the prophet compared to the gentle, refreshing rain of God

pouring out of the heavens. It's no wonder Peter was in love with Jesus.

The second dynamic also is about falling in love. It, too, is compelling, but in a very different way. What Jesus was asking of Peter now was strength, courage, loyalty. Jesus' love was not an abstraction. His love - and this is so difficult for us to understand - was not an emotion. It was a lifestyle of helping, serving, healing, feeding, liberating. The dialogue between Peter and Jesus does not conclude with a mushy verbal affirmation of affection[redacted], but with the behavioral admonition, "Feed my sheep." Which is to say that the way one goes about loving Jesus is by helping with the sheep. Insert

Hans Kung somewhere quips that the list of great people who love Jesus but want nothing to do with the church would be long and distinguished indeed. And everyone on it has missed the point. You can't love Jesus without feeding the sheep, and that gets you mixed up with other folk and before

you know it you're in church.

Now no one possessed of common sense, or even a bit of sanity, is going to defend the perfection or purity of the church. In fact, on the topic of the church I've always thought the statement was adequate, albeit a little earthly, that - like the Ark - the conditions inside are intolerable until you consider what's going on outside.

Everyone possessed of an ounce of thoughtfulness knows the frailities and human failings of the church. Reflective church people - all - have a lovers quarrel with their own church. It is full of people. Worse yet, it is full of people we might not necessarily chose to like. In C. S. Lewis' Screwtape Letters, Satan counsels his lieutenant on the matter of fighting for the soul of a new Christian. "You want to lean pretty heavily on those neighbors," he says. "Make his mind flit to and fro between an expression like 'The Body of Christ' and the actual faces in the next pew."

You can't love Jesus without loving the sheep. Even as Jesus was pulling it out of him I believe Peter was recalling all those instances when love became visible, tangible, physical: when Jesus, moved by compassion had healed his own mother-in-law; when he gently touched little children; and ate with unclean street people; and in hot anger overturned tables and drove moneychangers from the temple; and when in awful majesty - at the end knelt in front of each of them and washed their feet.

I see in Peter my own attraction to the power of that kind of love. The allure has always been a love which has integrity and authenticity and strength about it. But there is a sense in which that strength also repels.

After all, falling in love is very risky business. To be in love with one person is to love humanity more: it is to experience more, sense more, care more and hurt more. If you do not want that, if you do not want your life changed, to love

your conscience invaded

and feel and live more, it is better not to get close to Jesus.

He defines our humanity better than anybody else. Better than anyone he shows us what human life can be and therefore what our own potential is.

The allure of Jesus is that to think about it much is to know that his life is how God planned human life to be lived. Is there really any question any longer that he is the only person in history who understands how to live in peace? Is there any real question that until we learn of him to live together as brothers and sisters across all the lines of nation, class, race, and religion - there will be no peace? Is there any question but that he weeps again - over Jerusalem - and, yes - Belfast and Washington + London + Edinburgh + Chicago and that he would have his followers at least be able to do that? Is there any question about his position when our frustration and rage at terrorism erupt in new terrorism? Is there any question about where he

would be in our world and where his strong love would take him and and how he would respond to racism and poverty and oppression?

The dangerous allure of Jesus is that he said the truth and had the courage to tell the truth and live the truth. And in so doing he got himself crucified but also became a model of human life lived so fully that anyone who takes the time to learn about it and think about it will be forever haunted by it.

He was, Hans Kung wrote, the "true revolutionary." "What could be more revolutionary," the great theologian asks, than "love of enemies instead of destruction: unconditional forgiveness instead of retaliation; readiness to suffer instead of using force, blessings for peacemakers instead of hymns of hate and revenge." [On Being a Christian, p. 191]

From the earliest days of the Christian Church until today, the Gospel begins with a story about a man named Jesus. From the apostolic

preaching in 35 A.D. until now, the best of the pulpit is the story of the man. And from that day beside the ocean, when Jesus met Peter and asked, "Do you love me?" being a Christian has been a process of falling more deeply in love, and then finding that one's humanity, one's own life is miraculously enlivened and energized and enlarged and saved by that strong love.

It is, someone said, sublimely simple. "Do you love me?... Feed my sheep." Amen.